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ABSTRACT

This research was a direct test of the hypothesis that value change as a result of self-confrontation is unidirectional--that is, possible only in a direction that serves to maintain and enhance self-esteem, and thus is consistent with self-conceptions. The effectiveness of a self-confrontation treatment designed to increase the importance of the value 'equality' was compared for two groups of college students who initially ranked 'equality' low (13-18) on the Rokeach Value Survey. One group consisted of individuals whose low rankings of 'equality' were hypothesized to be inconsistent with self-conceptions. The other group consisted of individuals whose low rankings of 'equality' were hypothesized to be consistent with self-conceptions. As predicted from the unidirectionality hypothesis, significant increases in the rankings of 'equality' were found on a value measure five weeks after self-confrontation for the inconsistent group, but not for the consistent group. These changes were interpreted as substantially supporting the unidirectionality hypothesis and Rokeach's theory of cognitive consistency and change. (Author)

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# The unidirectional nature of value change: An experimental test

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# The unidirectional nature of value change: An experimental test

Can human values be arbitrarily manipulated? This is a question of considerable ethical importance that has arisen in connection with recent research investigating the nature of human value systems, and the conditions under which human values will undergo change. It has been proposed (Rokeach, 1973) that long-term changes in values and behaviors may be induced through a self-confrontation treatment in which individuals are given objective feedback about their own and about significant others' values, attitudes, and behaviors. It has been suggested that this feedback makes some individuals aware of the fact that certain of their values, attitudes, or behaviors are incompatible with their self-conceptions and are thus threatening to their self-esteem. It is hypothesized that awareness of such inconsistencies arouses a state of self-dissatisfaction. It is further suggested that as one means of reducing this negative affective state, some individuals will change their values, attitudes, or behaviors to become more consistent with self-conceptions.

Research indicates that under appropriate circumstances, this self-confrontation treatment does, in fact, lead to significant long-term cognitive and behavioral changes. For example, students undergoing self-confrontation designed to increase the importance of the value equality have been found to show significant value changes, to respond more frequently to NAACP membership solicitations, and to enroll more frequently in minority studies courses. Furthermore, these changes persisted as long as 15 to 21 months after a single treatment session (Rokeach, 1973). Other

researchers have reported similar results. Conroy, Katkin, and Barnette (note 1), for instance, have reported changes in values and smoking behaviors after self-confrontation designed to increase the importance of the value self-controlled. Greenstein (in press) has also reported changes in the values and classroom behaviors of student teachers as a result of self-confrontation designed to increase the importance of the value mature love.

The implications of such findings have raised important ethical questions as to possible abuses of the self-confrontation treatment. In particular, concern has been expressed that the technique might be used to arbitrarily manipulate values. However, a central principle of self-confrontation theory is that value changes as a result of self-confrontation are unidirectional--that is, possible only in whichever direction maintains and enhances self-esteem, and is consistent with a given individual's self-conceptions. Thus, it would be predicted that arbitrary manipulation of values through self-confrontation procedures is unlikely.

However, while Rokeach (1973) has presented compelling theoretical arguments in support of the unidirectionality hypothesis, this aspect of his theory has never been experimentally tested. Recent research (Rokeach, note 2), however, has suggested a method for conducting such a test. In this research, college students were asked to indicate for each value on the Rokeach Value Survey if (a) they would increase or decrease the importance of that value for American society if they had the power to do so, and (b) if they would resist attempts by others to increase or decrease the importance of that value. Rokeach suggested that the responses to these questions indicated the degree to which individuals would tolerate

increases or decreases of specific values--that is, the extent to which such changes would be consistent with their self-conceptions and would maintain or enhance their self-esteem.

The research presented in this paper attempts an experimental test of the unidirectionality hypothesis by using Rokeach's method to identify individuals whose self-conceptions are such that they would resist a specific value change, and then exposing these individuals to a self-confrontation treatment designed to change that value.

To test the unidirectionality hypothesis, the effectiveness of a self-confrontation treatment designed to increase the importance of the value equality was compared for two groups: (a) those whose low priority for equality was identified beforehand as being inconsistent with self-conceptions and (b) those whose low priority for equality was identified beforehand as being consistent with self-conceptions. The unidirectionality hypothesis predicts that those whose low priority for equality is inconsistent with self-conceptions will show significant increases in equality ranking on the Rokeach Value Survey after the self-confrontation treatment, while those whose low priority for equality is consistent with self-conceptions will not.

A failure to support the unidirectionality hypothesis would have two implications. On a theoretical level, it would seriously challenge Rokeach's theory of cognitive consistency and change. Because Rokeach postulates that value change after self-confrontation can best be understood as the resolution of inconsistencies between value priorities and self-conceptions, a test of the unidirectionality hypothesis can

be seen as a central test of his basic theory. If the unidirectionality hypothesis is found not to hold, it would imply that value change involves processes other than those aimed at resolving inconsistencies between values and self-conceptions. On an ethical level, a failure to support the unidirectional hypothesis would indicate that self-confrontation may potentially be abused to arbitrarily manipulate an individual's values. Such a finding would have serious social, political, and ethical implications.

## Method

The experimental design consisted of a pretest, a treatment, and a posttest. Each of these will be considered in turn.

### Pretest

A sample of 849 students from introductory sociology and psychology classes at Washington State University was pretested. During the pretest session, the participants were asked to complete the Rokeach Value Survey (Rokeach, 1967) ranking the two lists of 18 values in order of importance as guiding principles in their lives. After the Value Surveys were completed, they were collected, and the participants were given a second questionnaire designed to determine whether a high or low regard for the value equality was compatible with their self-conceptions. The participants were asked to imagine that they had discovered the secret of changing other

people's values. Their task was to indicate whether they would increase or decrease the importance of each of the 36 values from the Rokeach Value Survey for American society if they had the power to do so. Then the participants were asked to imagine that certain other individuals or organizations were attempting to change people's values and were asked to indicate for each value if they would (a) resist efforts to increase the importance of that value or (b) resist efforts to decrease the importance of that value.

Groups

Approximately one week after the pretest, three groups of these students were contacted by phone and were invited to participate in a second study. All three groups were solicited from among participants who had ranked the value equality low, that is, 13 or lower on the 18 value ranking scale.

The first experimental group consisted of 30 individuals who had (a) indicated that they would decrease the importance of the value equality for American society if given the chance to do so, and (b) indicated that they would oppose attempts by others to increase the importance of this value. It was hypothesized that this group had self-conceptions that were consistent with their low rankings of the value equality. It was therefore predicted that this group--the value consistent group--would not be affected by a self-confrontation treatment designed to increase the importance of equality.

The second experimental group--the value inconsistent group--consisted of 34 individuals who had (a) indicated that they would increase the

importance of the value equality for American society if given the chance, and (b) indicated that they would oppose the efforts of others to decrease the importance of this value. It was hypothesized that these individuals had self-conceptions that were inconsistent with their low rankings of the value equality. It was therefore predicted that these individuals would increase their rankings of equality as a result of self-confrontation in order to make their priority for this value more consistent with their self-conceptions.

The third group--the control group--consisted of a random selection of 31 individuals who had ranked the value equality low. This group was included to control for regression effects, and to provide an appropriate comparison group for the two experimental groups. This group did not undergo the self-confrontation treatment.

Self-confrontation treatment

During the treatment session, the participants in the experimental groups were first asked to rank the 18 terminal values from the Rokeach Value Survey. They were then shown Table 1, which depicted the average value rankings that had been previously obtained from Washington State University students. Their attention was drawn to the finding that previously tested college students had, on the average, ranked freedom fourth, and equality eleventh. To arouse feelings of dissatisfaction, the experimenter interpreted these findings to mean that Washington State University students, in general, are much more concerned with their own freedom than they are with the freedom of other people. The experimental participants

were then asked to spend a few moments comparing their own rankings of the same 18 values with the results presented in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Then, to increase the level of self-dissatisfaction even further, the participants were asked to state the extent of their sympathy with the aims of civil rights movements as follows: (a) I am sympathetic, and I have personally participated in a civil rights demonstration, (b) I am sympathetic, but I have not participated in a civil rights demonstration, or (c) I am not sympathetic with the aims of the civil rights movement. Immediately afterward, they were shown Table 2, which displayed a highly significant positive relationship between attitude toward civil rights demonstrations and ranking of equality.

The experimenter interpreted the results presented in Table 2 as follows: "This raises the question as to whether those who are against civil rights are really saying that they care a great deal about their own freedom, but are indifferent to other people's freedom." "Those who are for civil rights are perhaps saying that they not only want freedom for themselves, but for other people too."

Once again, the participants were invited to compare their own rankings of freedom and equality, and their own position on the civil rights issue with the results shown in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Control treatment

The treatment session for the control group followed the same basic procedure as for the experimental groups. The control participants ranked their own values and were shown the average value rankings of the Washington State students presented in Table 1. However, their attention was not focused on the values freedom and equality. In addition, although they were asked to indicate their degree of sympathy with the civil rights movement, they were given neither the information presented in Table 2 nor the experimenter's interpretation of the value rankings.

Value posttest

The value posttest was mailed to the participants 5 weeks after the treatment sessions. The posttest consisted of the Rokeach Value Survey (Rokeach, 1967), and several measures of personality which will not be discussed here because they were employed for other purposes. The posttest was mailed by an agency completely removed from the experimental situation (the Washington State University Social Research Center) and was identified as the Fall 1974 Student Information Survey. A cover letter explained that the survey was being conducted in order to assess student opinion on a number of school-related, local, and national issues. To further protect against demand characteristics, the survey was completely anonymous and was matched with pretest data on the basis of several demographic questions (e.g., sex, birthdate, and city and state of birth). A postage-paid return envelope was enclosed with the surveys.

## Results

It was decided that the most appropriate analyses for these data were a priori *t*-tests comparing the mean *equality* rankings at the posttest adjusted for the *equality* rankings obtained at the treatment session. To obtain these adjusted means and a pooled estimate of the variance to be used in calculating the t-tests, an analysis of covariance was applied to the data before proceding with the planned comparisons. This analysis revealed an overall effect for groups, $F(2,86) = 2.87$, $p < .06$. The adjusted means obtained from this analysis of covariance are presented in Table 3. As predicted, the planned comparisons revealed that the adjusted mean *equality* ranking for the value-inconsistent group was significantly higher than for either the control group, $t(86) = 2.15$, $p < .05$, or the value-consistent group, $t(86) = 2.29$, $p < .05$. The adjusted mean *equality* ranking for the value-consistent group did not differ significantly from that of the control group, $t(86) = 0.23$, $p > .05$.

## Discussion

The important finding of this study was that the self-confrontation treatment led to significant increases in the rankings of the value *equality* only for those experimental participants who had previously stated that they would not resist attempts by others to increase the importance of this value, and, moreover, would initiate such increases in others if given the opportunity to do so. In the context of Rokeach's theory of cognitive change

(Rokeach, 1973), these individuals were those for whom low rankings of equality were inconsistent with self-conceptions. For these individuals, increases in equality rankings would serve to maintain and enhance self-conceptions and self-esteem. On the other hand, no significant increases in equality rankings were found for those experimental participants who had previously stated that they would resist attempts by others to increase the importance of this value, and, moreover, that they would initiate decreases in the importance of this value in others if given the opportunity to do so. These individuals were those for whom low rankings of equality were consistent with self-conceptions. For these individuals, increases in equality rankings would not serve to maintain or enhance self-conceptions or self-esteem. These findings substantially support the unidirectionality hypothesis and suggest that a major determinant of value change after self-confrontation is self-dissatisfaction resulting from awareness of inconsistencies between values and self-conceptions. Thus, these findings support Rokeach's theory of cognitive change, and indicate that arbitrary manipulation of human values through self-confrontation is unlikely.

Reference notes

1. Conroy, W., Katkin, E., & Barnette, W. Modification of smoking behavior by Rokeach's self-confrontation technique. Paper presented at the meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, April 1973.

2. Rokeach, M. The unidirectional nature of value change. Unpublished manuscript, 1975. (Available from Dr. M. Rokeach, Department of Sociology, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington 99163).

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Rokeach, M. Value survey, Sunnyvale, Calif.: Halgren Tests, 1967.

Rokeach, M. The nature of human values. New York: Free Press, 1973.

## Footnotes

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Table 1.

Average Value System of 216 Washington State Students Shown to Experimental Participants to Arouse Self-Dissatisfaction

| | |
|---|---|
| 14 | A COMFORTABLE LIFE |
| 12 | AN EXCITING LIFE |
| 10 | A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT |
| 9 | A WORLD AT PEACE |
| 15 | A WORLD OF BEAUTY |
| 11 | EQUALITY |
| 8 | FAMILY SECURITY |
| 4 | FREEDOM |
| 1 | HAPPINESS |
| 2 | INNER HARMONY |
| 5 | MATURE LOVE |
| 18 | NATIONAL SECURITY |
| 13 | PLEASURE |
| 16 | SALVATION |
| 6 | SOCIAL RECOGNITION |
| 17 | SELF-RESPECT |
| 3 | TRUE FRIENDSHIP |
| 7 | WISDOM |

Table 2

Information presented to experimental participants to arouse self-dissatisfaction

Average rankings of freedom and equality by students for and against civil rights

| | Sympathetic and have participated | Sympathetic but have not participated | Not sympathetic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Freedom | 1 | 6 | 5 |
| Equality | 5 | 9 | 15 |

Table 3.

Mean equality rankings at the posttest adjusted by analysis of covariance for equality rankings at the treatment session[a]

| Group | Posttest |
|---|---|
| No treatment control | 13.34 (31) |
| Value-consistent | 13.55 (26) |
| Value-inconsistent | 11.47 (30) |

[a] Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of participants in each group who completed and returned the posttest.

Control vs value consistent, $t(86) = 0.23$ $p > .05$

Control vs value inconsistent, $t(86) = 2.15$ $p < .05$

Value consistent vs value inconsistent, $t(86) = 2.29$, $p < .05$